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by
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Let me introduce you briefly to six teachers:

Anna is a teacher in an infant-toddler program. She has been a kindergarten teacher and a teacher in day care for twelve years. When her own daughter was born, she decided to take two years away from work. From her daughter she learned the importance of those first years in a child's growth and development and, upon returning to work, she chose infant care. Anna is well-known by parents and teachers in her community as an outstanding teacher.

Chana is a group family day care provider. She began taking children into her home while she was caring for her own two children and has carried that work on even after her youngest son went on to elementary school several years ago. Chana cares for twelve children with the help of two assistants. Chana's day care home is exemplary and she is often asked to speak about day care issues at community and professional gatherings. Chana has a master's degree from Bank Street College of Education, and she is a leader in the effort to obtain official recognition for group family day care.

Michele teaches in a pre-kindergarten program in a public elementary school. She has three daughters, the eldest in college and the youngest in kindergarten. Michele went to City College of New York, taught in day care for ten years, and has taught in an innovative public school for three years. Her husband teaches in the same school and they share a commitment to urban, public education as well as a deep investment in a child-centered approach to teaching. Michele is widely recognized among her peers as an outstanding teacher.

JoAnne has worked in child care for over ten years as founder, director, and now collective member of JoAnne's Child Care Community. JoAnne is largely self-educated, having read widely and deeply in child development and early childhood education. The fact that she never attended college surprises colleagues and associates because of her broad knowledge of and huge reputation in the field. She often speaks at early childhood conferences, and was profiled in a national magazine for developing an exemplary non-sexist and non-racist program.

Darlene is the mother of four children, and is organizer and director of a unique and astonishing day care center for the children of homeless families.

Darlene began teaching in day care in 1978, and has been director or head teacher in several settings. Besides teaching and parenting, Darlene is a graduate student in educational administration and special education. Darlene is well-known and highly regarded among early childhood professionals.

Maya teaches kindergarten in a school that was founded in the heady days of the progressive education movement. She is a mother and a grandmother; both roles she relishes. Maya has taught young children for over twenty years, and has also spent part of her time in recent years teaching teachers. Maya has been approached many times to move to adult education, but she resists, feeling that her best work is with youngsters. She balances her professional life, continuing to be a kindergarten teacher, and offering workshops and classes to other teachers throughout the year.

These are the main characters of a story I wrote recently about teachers and autobiography. Because of my training and the context of my work with these teachers, I should say these are the subjects of my study and, of course, that is true also. If I used those words, many readers would be comforted and reassured, while a few might be put off. In either case, we would share in a sense of familiarity, for the language of the social scientist, of the technician and the expert, is not only the common sense language of educational research, but increasingly the everyday language of our modern world.

My project was not, however, a study in the traditional sense, and the language of the report was not expert, not technical. What I attempted, rather, was an unfolding of life narratives and an opening of meaning in which teachers' voices became central. As these teachers examined the dailiness and the ordinariness of their lives with children, and as they looked backward and forward in an attempt to understand the present reality as a moment in an unfinished story, we identified themes and patterns together, and we began to get a clearer focus on the choices, conflicts, contradictions, tensions, dilemmas, and joys of their lives with children. The talk was everyday teacher talk, and so it was also value-talk and feeling-talk. It was talk of the ordinary and the mundane, and yet it was talk that was frequently eloquent, consistently thoughtful, and always infused with a sense of care and connection.

Some have criticized this inquiry for its seeming lack of scientific rigor. My brief response to the charge of being unscientific is to plead guilty. This work is not based on a positivistic model. It makes no claim to general rules nor to having great predictive value. There is no attempt to couch these words in the assumed bloodless objectivity of data-driven empiricism.

Rather, there is an attempt to recast the subjective experiences and the personal feelings of these teachers as valuable in their (as well as our) understanding of teaching. There is an embracing of the unique, the particular, the possible. There is a search (perhaps this is a better choice of word than "research" here, pointing as it does to the singular quest and the specific challenge) for detail, for the unique signature of each teacher. Looking back at the brief introductions, note what we have gained and what we have missed thus far. We know, for example, that JoAnne has no formal education, and that Chana has a master's degree from Bank Street College. We assume that JoAnne has no children. We could, if we chose, find out more information of this type: age, IQ, anything you like. We could search for patterns in these data, patterns that might define good teaching, for example, from the outside.

What we don't know yet, and precisely what this work aimed at, is the insider's perspective. What does any of this mean to these teachers themselves? What significance does it hold? What value does any of it have in their worlds? How does it impact their teaching? Clearly our introductions, each a sketch of objective information, are inadequate to answer these other kinds of questions. This initial information may pique our interest, and it may play a role in our growing understanding, but it is as forgettable as cocktail party conversation unless we find a way to go beyond, to pierce the veil of facts. If we want to discover things like meaning, value, significance, and context in our search for understanding, we must move into other areas and probe more deeply. We certainly must find a way to hear the teachers' voices.

I chose in this work to discover a lot about a few teachers, rather than a little about a lot of teachers. Instead of aggregating teachers in order to research the common teacher, the point here was to celebrate the particular, the uncommon, and the unpredictable. This choice was based on a strong belief that it is in the lived situations of actual teachers and children--rather than in, for example, the educational commissions, policy panels, or research institutions --that the teaching enterprise exists and can best be understood. This requires seeing the reality of teaching and teachers in as full a context as possible. The "secret" of teaching after all is in the detail of everyday practice, the very stuff that is washed away in attempts to generalize about teaching. The goal here was not to predict, but perhaps to extend our sense of the possible by portraying some of the breadth and scope of what preschool teaching can be. We do not, of course, end up with truth, but perhaps more modestly with a burgeoning sense of meaning and knowing grounded in real people and concrete practices. I aimed at understanding, not explanation.

Since reform proposals, curriculum units, and administrative directives ultimately live or die in the hands of individual teachers, it is to individual teachers that we must ultimately turn if we are to understand teaching. It is true, of course, that no teacher is an island, none is a perfectly free agent. Teachers are shaped by powerful social and economic forces, forces that coerce and constrain, prod and bombard, push and pull. Teachers particularly are formed by their relationships to power and their role in a bureaucracy geared to reproducing the social relations of society.

But it is also true that teachers finally decide what goes on in classrooms. When the door is closed and the noise from outside and inside has settled, a teacher chooses. She can decide to satisfy distant demands or not, accommodate established expectations or not, embrace her narrowest self-interest or not. She can decide whether to merely survive another day of inexhaustible demands and limited energy or she can decide, for example, to interpret and invent, resist and rebel. She can decide to link up with others and create something different. There are all kinds of ways to choose, all kinds of ways for people to invent their teaching in a world that is often resistant and always problematic, and in this work I saw six ways in vivid detail.

So, while we note that powerful forces in society have serious and intricate designs on schools, we also acknowledge that any designs must finally be filtered through the minds and the hearts and the hands of teachers and students. And, while teachers may be cajoled or fooled or, as in these times, threatened or punished into accepting and implementing certain practices, they also might not. In looking at teachers we are looking at the base of the educational pyramid

(and in looking at preschool teachers we are at the lower end of the bottom). Ironically, if we look closely enough, we are also looking at the peak of power and possibility.

I tried to look closely enough, working simultaneously to construct ethnographic and autobiographical texts. I felt that by observing these teachers and then asking them to help me better understand some of the detail of their work--both phenomenologically and from the perspective of historical precedent--we could construct honest and textured portraits of teachers. This kind of exercise, I thought, had the potential to become a powerful tool in teacher education as well as teacher renewal. In creating self-portraits, I thought teachers would become more self-aware, more self-conscious. In becoming more self-conscious, I figured, teachers could also become more intentional, freer, more able to endorse or reject aspects of their own teaching that they found hopeful or contrary, more able to author their own teaching scripts.

Part of the time I functioned as a participant observer, collecting detailed notes, mapping spaces, diagramming and describing each teacher in the context of a specific setting, and attempting to move from broad to more focused and selected accounts of practice. The participation and observations were guided by my own intuition and experience as an early childhood teacher, as well as those things these teachers and their children brought to my attention. Observations focused on the structures and routines of each setting, the interactions among the children as well as between the adults and the children, the actions of the teacher, the explicit and implicit goals of each program, and the feeling-tone of each group. Part of the time I was an interviewer, and interviews tended to be informal, open-ended situations. My goal was to develop a meaningful narrative text that described and linked together influences, events, people, and experiences that contributed to the creation of the teacher as she finds herself today. Probing the significance of current activity and reconstructing a meaningful past created the conditions for each teacher, speaking in her own voice, to critically examine teaching practices and locate them in a continuum from past to future. What emerged was a kind of autobiography, although the word "autobiography" seemed too heavy, too loaded with earth-shaking expectations for all of us. My word was "co-biography" in an attempt to highlight the collaborative aspect of this project, but that word seemed awkward and unreal too. "Life-narratives" was the handy and unanimous usage for what we were constructing, and it was the life-narratives combined with the ethnographic accounts that emerged as the portraits of preschool teachers.

The most interesting area of inquiry was the use of "non-linear" or "interpretive" activities (Bolin, 1986). Focused interpretive activities explore the same ground as interviews or questionnaires or vignettes but without the heavy reliance on speaking or writing. They involve working with familiar materials (paper, clay, and paint, for example) to represent or symbolize salient experiences. Interpretive activities can disengage people from conscious thought and provide insight and significant discoveries. One interpretive activity that I used, for example, involved teachers using clay to depict particularly successful moments in teaching. This is not unlike being asked in an interview to describe a successful moment in teaching, but it offers the possibility of opening to this question in new and surprising ways, of disengaging intellectually and discovering a different pathway to meaning. An example of a non-linear activity that many people engage in spontaneously is doodling, and an interesting case of doodling providing a turning point in an autobiographical project is offered by

Alex Haley describing his work on The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965). Malcolm X had wanted his autobiography to be a classic conversion model, the testament of a saved person, and so he refused to talk about anything of a personal nature and offered only the most formal statements about his life. Haley felt that this refusal was disastrous as far as writing a meaningful narrative was concerned. He noticed, however, that as Malcolm X spoke, he often doodled on napkins. Haley took to collecting and reading the napkins, and eventually even to providing Malcolm X with blank paper and pens. It was from the "private utterances of the napkins" (Eakin, 1980, p. 191) that Haley formulated the first probing, personal questions that began Malcolm X's powerful telling of his social and political goals in the context of his own life-situation.

In interviews, vignettes, and interpretive activities, the goal was to build up a store of reflective information about practice and background, to develop the beginnings of a thoughtful narrative. While the effort ranged widely, I eventually grouped questions for convenience into three broad areas of concern:

1. The Reflective Practitioner.

   What do you like most about teaching? What are the rewards for you? When do you feel best as a teacher? What are your favorite moments?

   What is most difficult about teaching? Do you ever feel like leaving? Why? Why do you stay? If you could, what things would you change in your work?

   Which children appeal to you? Why? Which ones make your work problematic?

   What is the role of parents in your work? What is your role in the lives of children and families?

   What should it be? Why is your space arranged the way it is? Why do you follow particular routines?

   Why do you teach as you do? What criteria do you have in mind? What do you take to be valuable in your teaching? What other teachers do you admire? Why? What are your goals for children? How do you meet these goals?

2. The Autobiographer.

   When did you decide to become a teacher? What did your decision mean to you at that time? What about teaching interested or attracted you?

   What role, explicitly or implicitly, did your family play in your decision to teach? Do you remember any early experiences that affected your decision to teach?

   Do you remember any outstanding teachers from your years as a student? What do you remember? Did this influence your decision in any way?

   What was your formal teacher education like? Did it prepare you for the realities of teaching? Is teaching pretty much what you'd expected? When you first taught, were there any colleagues or mentors who influenced you? How?

Can you remember when you felt comfortable as a teacher, confident with your own philosophy and practical knowledge?

Can you think of early experiences that continue to influence what and how you teach now? Can you describe the central teaching ideas that guide your work and how you came to adopt them?

Are you sometimes surprised to see what you have become?

Have you changed as a teacher over the years? How?

3. The Whole Person.

What is of value to you beyond teaching? Are you involved in any social or political groups?

What concerns you most about children and families today? About the state of society or the world?

Are there any conflicts between your goals for children and the school's goals? Society's goals? If so, do the conflicts affect the children? How?

Are you involved in any other projects or interests outside of teaching? What? How are they important to you?

What have you read recently that was significant to you?

What do you imagine you'll be doing in five years? In ten years?

We were all, of course, looking at an enterprise that is complex, idiosyncratic, and largely mysterious, something David Denton (1974) describes as a "world of intentional action, individuated and shared meanings, affectional ties, tensive relationships, in which there is always the possibility of one's saying no" (p. 108). We were looking at people who are assumed to be moral, self-determining agents even as they are entangled and constrained by a host of pressures and factors. And we were looking at people's lives--not categories or summaries--being lived in a shared world. We were attempting to hear teachers' voices, to attend to teachers' stories with care and hope.

Chana

Following is an excerpt from a portrait of Chana:

Chana is a group family day care provider. "Don't call me a teacher," she insists. "I run a group family day care home. People who say they 'teach' kids eighteen months to four years old are doing something I don't do. I don't have a credential and I don't identify with it. I could teach, and believe me, life would be easier, but then I would have abandoned something I've fought for years." I continue to use the word "teacher" occasionally, but I mean it in the broadest sense of someone who engages whole people--mind, body, emotion, culture, spirit--in learning. But each time I say "teacher" in her presence, I am immediately corrected.

Her apartment is not only home for her, her husband, and their two sons, it is also the home-away-from-home for seventeen toddlers who attend on a complexly staggered schedule. The apartment reflects both realities: a large and comfortable home with a lovely old breakfront, a grand piano, crowded bookshelves, and walls adorned with paintings, pictures, and family photographs including ancient relatives and cousins in Israel; and a well-organized day care center with changing table and potty chairs, step-stools and booster seats, art materials, and manipulatives. Except for Chana's bedroom which is off-limits and behind the only closed door in the apartment, the entire space flip-flops every day and serves two complementary but very different needs. On one visit her younger son was home from school with the flu, and so he was in his parents' room. He slept and read and played quietly. Daniel, eight years old, had been part of the day care as a toddler himself, and now seems to take the constraints of the toddler invasion in stride: "I keep my stuff put away and it's not a big deal. If there's a big mess I don't like it, but it's usually ok."

"I was born in Philadelphia," Chana says, "and raised in a Jewish neighborhood after the war. It was a striving, middle-class environment with clean, new schools. Everyone I saw was rising together, and everyone I knew was very much alike. By junior high school and high school there were always so many of us and we were the smartest and belonged to all the clubs so that I never felt outside of anything. I can see the problems and limitations of that life now. But it was at that time a safe harbor for me--a place from which to grow up with confidence and feeling."

Characteristically, as soon as Chana reads this her objections begin. "I guess I am uncomfortable with the beginning of this portrait because we devote so few words to a whole community's experiences. It makes my view seem trivial." She is a substantial woman, combining elements in equal measure that would seem contradictory in another person: she is opinionated and open, caring and demanding, understanding and convinced. She is also self-assured, dependable, and unequivocal. "I am not wispy. I am not airy," she says by way of self-description. "I met a Torah Scribe recently who told about his craft and taught calligraphy to teachers in Jewish schools. Many of us did not have Hebrew names --especially those of us born before Israel existed. We came from a shtetl tradition with Yiddish names. I was asked for my name in preparing forms for my son's Bar Mitzvah. The Torah Scribe had a list and told me Chana Matanah is my Hebrew name. I like it." Chana Matanah means gift and Chana is a solid and undivided gift.

Chana and her sister were raised in an old-fashioned extended family. Her mother started working during the war, and her father was often away on business. "In a sense my grandmother raised me, and she was a wonderful mother. On top of that I had an aunt who looked exactly like my mother (her identical twin) and her husband, and my mother's brother--and all of us living under one roof." It was a nurturing set of people for a child to have, and that felt good. "The daily separations from my mother were so early in my life and so natural that I'm not sure we felt them as separations at all. We all lived together and lots of people were in charge of me. I wasn't bundled and dropped. No vital toys or bottles were left behind. All objects stayed the same. No guilt. No conflicts that I can remember. When we moved to our own house, the first thing I learned to do was to take the bus to grandma's. My grandfather was ill and a shut-in, and I spent my weekends with them." Her most powerful early memories involve time with her grandfather--making ice cream in a freezing tray, drinking tea

with lots of milk and sugar, collecting pictures of automobiles from magazines and the faces of movie stars that came as a promotion in the bread they bought; and her grandmother--singing Russian songs, organizing efforts for the ILGWU, helping to sort her piece work and collect tickets for "a partial," the partial unemployment benefits available to part-time workers.

Chana's parents had a small accounting firm and her mother had an office in the house. Now there is a small crack in the almost perfect picture just described. Chana remembers that her sister complained about the family business because there was a sense of their mother divided and preoccupied. There was often something to do in the office, and their mother would go there after dinner or on Sundays. There were clients coming and going in the evenings. Chana says that she and her sister grew up respecting their parents' involvement in the community, an involvement that sometimes drew them away. And they had their child's complaint: "We thought if she had a regular job then when she was home she would be completely there for us. It's a laugh to me now, because I sometimes think my own kids experience a similar problem with my work. They must sometimes think that if I had a real job at least I could call in sick or take vacation once in a while."

Today Chana's building is solid, the lobby spacious and clean with mirrors and ornamental tiles, the elevators speedy and efficient. It is not difficult to find Chana's apartment on the sixth floor: the visitor simply follows the sounds of childrens' voices and laughter and tears around a corner and down the end of a corridor where there is a parking lot of carriages and strollers. "The neighbors put up with a lot," Chana admits sympathetically. "And they say encouraging things to me all the time." The building and the neighborhood are traditionally German-Jewish. There are many older people. "They all seem to like the kids," she says.

On the door to apartment 6C is a cardboard sign with a plastic cylinder taped to it and in large letters a message: "No-choke testing tube--a simple test for safety--$1.00." Next to the sign is a clipboard with a note saying, "We are going to the nursing home this morning." Inside the door is a closet and a short corridor leading to the dining room. Along the length of the corridor is a bulletin board for parents, and directly below and parallel to it a long mirror at knee level (toddler eye-level). The bulletin board is busy with information for parents: an article entitled "12 Alternatives to Whacking Your Kid," a list of neighborhood social services, a pamphlet called "What You Can Do to Stop Disease in Your Child's Day Care Center," an envelope of voter registration forms, a xeroxed page with a large heading "HEAD LICE," an information sheet about library programs, an advertisement for automobile restraints, a pamphlet about a parenting center run out of the Y, an article about reading to your young child, a notice about children's television, and an envelope of notes concerning frequent activities or announcements for use when appropriate on the front door, for example, "We are planting today." "Painting with Florence." "In the playground." "Movement today with Joanne." "Welcome back." "We need paper." "Music today with Toby."

Opposite the mirror and down into the dining room a bit is a low, long set of pegs for coats and hats. Under each peg rests a cardboard square for boots or shoes with a set of silhouetted feet cut from colorful, patterned paper, and a child's name pasted to each. The dining room table is covered with plastic, and on top of the plastic is a pile of construction paper, some magic markers,

several rolls of brightly colored tape, and three varieties of age-appropriate scissors: the classic small, dull round-nosed type, a space-age spring-action set to be gripped as if shaking hands, and an ingenious pair with small finger holes for a young child snuggled beneath large finger holes for an adult hand.

"Oh, it's hard to wait," Chana empathizes with Oren who is spinning anxiously in his seat while another child chooses which tape to use. Two children are working busily, seated on booster chairs. Oren doesn't want a booster and he's shifting this way and that in the grown-up dining room chair. "Here, Oren, it's your turn. I'm going to turn you around so you're more comfortable. If you don't want a booster then move around here on your knees so you can reach the table." Oren begins to cut tape and stick it gleefully on the paper.

The dining room is the central room and off of it is a den, the kitchen, the living room, and a corridor leading to the bathroom and the bedrooms. The den is a beehive of early childhood energy and purpose. Iliusha is working on a puzzle with great animation. He is large and loud and he exclaims as he fits each piece together with bursts of heart and spit and great dramatic gestures accompanied by powerful Russian phrases. Two children are going on a make-believe shopping trip with little red and yellow plastic shopping cards piled with dolls and stuffed animals. One child has a hat on and a jangling row of bracelets up one arm. "We're going to the supermarket," she says. "I'm the super-mommy and you're the super-daddy."

In the kitchen JoAnne, one of Chana's assistants, oversees the making of apple crisp for a special snack. Three children on booster chairs are pulled up to the long kitchen table and are cutting apples like mad into all imaginable shapes and sizes from massive chunks to tiny slivers. A lot of apple makes it into a large mixing bowl, and a lot is eaten by the cooks themselves. JoAnne talks about the recipe and how they will proceed as she works alongside the children. She doesn't mind their eating, but she reminds the children several times not to put the dull plastic knives into their mouths. "Serious cooks don't put knives in their mouths." The children nod and chop and chew.

The bell sounds and JoAnne answers the intercom and then buzzes in a new arrival. In a few minutes Gina bursts through the door followed by her mother. Gina is two, bundled in coat and scarf and hat with just a bit of round face and sparkling eyes peeking out. Chana greets them and kneels down alongside to chat as Gina's mother unbundles her, revealing a sturdy, smiling girl. After a trip to the bathroom and some last instructions, Gina's mom is ready to leave. Chana lifts Gina up for a last hug and then tries to interest her in an activity in the den. Gina is comfortable in Chana's arms, her body and face relaxed, but she insists, "One more hug!" and Chana easily agrees. Gina suggests they walk mommy to the door, and they do. Chana proposes they go in now, but Gina wants to walk mommy to the elevator. Chana goes along and they say goodbye again. Chana now asks, "Do you want to wave from the window?" and Gina does. So they wait a minute and then open the hall window and Gina stands on the sill holding onto the child protection gate and yells goodbye. "The kids love it, and I only worry about the neighbors when the kids dance on the radiator too enthusiastically and make too much noise." From six floors below Gina's mother waves and blows kisses and Gina laughs and jumps down, heading eagerly back to Chana's.

Just as Gina joins the cooking crew Carolyn arrives. She only comes two mornings a week and she is not really settled in on this day when her mother

hurries off. Chana holds her and rocks her but she sobs and sobs. "I want mommy." Soon her face is puffy and red and dripping. Chana, wiping nose and eyes, rocks her and softly chants, "Mommies go away, and mommies come back; Mommies go away, and mommies come back." The sobbing recedes a bit, and then returns full force. "I want her. I want her." Chana comforts and affirms. "You want your mommy," she says softly. "Mommy will come back after lunch. Mommy's working."

"No, she's not working."

"Well, she's working on something. Remember she told you she'd be back after lunch and she told me to take good care of you and to check your pamper and to put Desitin on your rash? Let's check it now." Chana's soothing chant becomes a kind of mantra.

(Later, when reading this, Chana commented, "It's all true, but me? A mantra? Cute.")

After a time Chana moves into the den and pulls a large shoe box from a shelf. In it are well-handled, contact-covered photographs of mommys and daddys, grandmas and grandpas, dogs, friends and vacations, and happy Chana-care moments like trips to the playground and the nursing home. She finds Carolyn's pictures and they look at them together. A couple of other children clamber onto the couch and sort through the pictures finding their own photographs. Soon photographs are strewn in all directions and Carolyn has found one that she clutches tightly to her stomach.

Chana moves Carolyn off her lap for the first time and gets down an audio tape from another shelf and puts it into the tape player. The tape is Carolyn's mommy reading a favorite book. Carolyn listens for a time and then cries a bit more. "I can't hear." Sarah complains. "Well," Chana responds gently, "She's having a personal cry, and it's hard for her to do it quietly."

Chana lies on her side on the floor with a box of small letter blocks. "Which block would Mommy like?"

"She likes both," Carolyn says seriously. It is the first authentic response of the morning, a real answer, engaged and thoughtful. Chana sets her to building a pile of blocks that Mommy would like. She works methodically, but she is still low-keyed and without enthusiasm. Her language begins to blossom some: "I need this one. I like this." But she is not yet herself.

"Separation is the curriculum," Chana explains later. "It's the whole program. And I think it's the central issue in child care. I'm very explicit about it with parents and with other providers. When parents come and see my home, it looks like such a wonderful place to visit, so many interesting things for kids to do, so inviting. And for parents who are anxious about academics, they see the letterboard for example, right away, even though I think it's stuck way off in the other room. They see the pre-school experience that they think will get their kid ready to read. But I'm very clear. I'm not promising anything. They're not going to read; they probably won't know their letters by the time they leave me. 'But she's so bright!' They're all bright. Fine. All I commit to, and what I work on, is that a child will feel okay here without her

parents, that she'll be able to acknowledge the difficulties and still participate fully in life here. That's the whole program."

When Chana interviews parents she describes why separation is such a critical issue for young children. She discusses the tension between connectedness and autonomy and she gives them materials to read. "We expect more than a change of clothes from parents," Chana says. "We want parents to be prepared to spend enough time here in the beginning to allow the child to feel comfortable, we want photographs and tapes from home, we want to create a comfortable bridge for kids. We do home visits and we go with small groups of kids to visit each home during the year. Of course, people interpret it differently. Some people do it in the way we had hoped they would, others say, 'But I have to be some place at 10 o'clock and I hope my kid isn't one who needs more time!' We have to live with that. There's bound to be a tension between what would be ideal and the realities of people's lives. Anyone who can spend the kind of time we would like working on separation until it is really comfortable for everyone is certainly privileged."

The audio tapes of parents and grandparents talking and reading favorite stories is inventive. There are two tape players, and children can listen in two rooms. "It's something I had done with my own kids," Chana explains. "But in a different way. My in-laws live far away and so I asked them to make tapes for my kids. I saw that it was meaningful to them, even to laugh at grandpa's accent, at his mispronunciations. My kids know 'Frog and Toad' backwards and forwards, and when grandpa says 'Frog and Todd' we can listen and laugh and also have a pleasant memory. I also miss my own grandfather, and when I recommend that parents tape grandparents reading and talking I think about what a treasure it will be."

Chana first used tapes in her teaching when she began to get children whose first language was not English. These children were having the same separation difficulties as everyone else, but they were compounded by being unable to communicate in English with some important adults. "I asked these parents for tapes, and I got 'The Carrot Seed' in Nepali and 'Goodnight Moon' in Serbo-Croatian, and I thought, 'This is great!' They were a comfort. It was an easy step from there to using that with all kids."

There are a lot of non-working telephones for the children and they play a lot at calling mommy and telling her what they need. "Kids use them because their parents use them and the telephone is a meaningful instrument in today's life," Chana explains. "We also tell parents who can stay in the beginning to go out for an hour and then call to check in. When they call, if all is well they're so relieved and they don't want to talk because that could be upsetting. I usually say, 'Look, if it's upsetting, let's let her get it out. Why should she have to hold herself together?' I mean it's like the parents who try to distract the kid in the morning and then sneak out. I'm against that. I think you need honest, reliable messages, and you need to allow for some honest upset. Some people are very much afraid of that crying. I think I'm pretty good at suffering the sadness and the let-down of separation, and then really enjoying the reunion, perhaps because my early separations weren't dreadful for me and I learned in my own extended family to trust separation. In any case I'm not torn up about separation questions and in a sense that makes me the perfect person for what I do."

Chana remembers a powerful separation from her own life. Her grandfather was housebound, then bound to one floor, one room, and one chair. "As his world constricted, the TV, radio, telephone, and newspapers became his connectors," she says. "I always thought he was the smartest man in the world. Now as I am writing I realize that he was no intellectual. He never had books brought in, didn't subscribe to magazines, and didn't express deep political commitments. Yet he seemed to me to be bright, exciting, interested in everything. He was interested in me and that's what makes me cry when I let myself remember him. He was sure I was the best--and so proud. His support was uncomplicated. His agenda was to spend as much time together as possible--and to enjoy it all we could. I think we watched the A's on TV. I am sure we heard the games on the radio. We listened to all the old-time radio stories--Suspense, Johnny Dollar, Henry Aldrich, Beulah, Amos and Andy. We listened to news and watched Dave Garroway. We discussed everything we saw. We ate candy and peanuts from a can and ice cream." When he died Chana felt a certain and deep loss, but she also felt prepared. Mourning in the supportive circle of her family allowed her to see his death as a natural part of life, and allowed her own life to go on.

In a way this memory makes Chana feel sorry for her own children. "We are all so busy that no one is just for them--absolutely delighted in teaching and listening to them. How interesting that I remember hours on end of full and complete attention and today we scratch to find one hour per week. Could more be tolerated? Is my memory a distortion?"

Chana brings the conversation back to child care saying, "It is good child development practice to acknowledge the pain and loss of separation for both sides. We do that here easily and naturally. We use pictures, tapes, and telephone calls to help parent and child through the experience. Events of the day and photos are posted on the front door--to prepare, build links, remember, and remind. Perhaps we reflect our own experiences in the special commitment we give to whatever part of good practice we really feel. In a sense I feel well prepared to share in easing separations. I am comfortable with tears, special transitional objects, and talking about anger and loss." Later, when asked to make an image of a successful moment in her teaching out of clay, Chana makes a small figure holding hands with two larger figures. "That's a child, Rachael in this case, and her mother and me making a bridge." Chana sometimes thinks of herself as a bridge for children, sometimes as a life raft for families.

Chana and JoAnne begin to change, toilet, and bundle up a group of children for the trip to the nursing home. They work steadily and purposefully, describing the trip, reminding kids of their visit last week, solving crises, overcoming obstacles, and in twenty minutes the parade of double strollers and care givers and hand-holding walkers head out the door. In the elevator Carolyn remembers her mommy and begins again to cry softly. "I want Mommy."

In the lobby several older people smile and nod, a few bend down to kooch the children in high-pitched sing-song voices. One woman asks Chana if she knows anyone who might be available to clean in her daughter's new kosher restaurant. Chana says she will keep it in mind and has her own request: "We're trying to collect blood for Harriet Eisner. She's at Einstein Hospital and needs B-negative. If you know anyone who can help, please call me."

On the street people smile, wave, and speak. One woman tells Chana she found a store in the neighborhood to get "sensible shoes." Chana thanks her.

The nursing home is around the corner and so, for all the preparation and bundling up, the group arrives in four minutes. Through the front door the social worker, a middle-aged woman with large glasses and traditional wig and hat, greets the children with genuine enthusiasm. She speaks to each by name and helps unbundle them and put their things on a couch in her office on one wall of which are eight photographs of previous visits--children and old people sharing a snack, a conversation, or a song--with a large heading: "Chana's Toddler Care and Us." This relationship appears to have a mutual benefit and a shared importance.

The children know the way to the recreation area and several rush down a corridor, through swinging double doors, past a waiting area with a forlorn traffic jam of wheelchairs and immobilized people waiting, and into the room with a table set up for them. Nine ancient women in wheelchairs are pulled up to the table as the children swirl in: Jesse is sleeping with her head tilted back, Lillian laughs and claps as the children arrive, Aileen begins talking to Josh who smiles every few words and says "no" without deterring Aileen in the least, Esther takes a child's hand and pats it lovingly. Chana greets each old woman by name, going from one to the other, touching each on the arm or the hand, asking about family. Fanny, regal but emaciated, looks up at her through thick bifocals and flashes yellow teeth through a worried smile. Chana introduces herself to Ethel, and Alexandra says, "She's new."

"What's new?" responds Ethel. "I'm old."

"Never mind," says Alexandra. "I'm here two years. It's OK. What are you going to do?"

Everyone shares a laugh.

The nursing home and toddler care staffs serve a snack of apples and oranges, toast with marmalade, and juice to the old and young people gathered around the table. As they eat, the staffs sing a name song called "Here We Are Together" in which each name is sung in turn. Several clap in time or sing bits of the song. After snack everyone shares paper and markers to make pictures together for one of the children's birthdays. Aileen encourages Daniel to keep the markers neat and in order, saying, "Keep it nice and together and they won't get lost." Daniel smiles as he works furiously on the paper, oblivious to her well-meaning advice. Carolyn remembers her mommy again and Chana picks her up, explaining to general sympathy that she is having a rough day missing her mommy. "We'll see Mommy right after lunch," she says to Carolyn.

Conclusion

In their outstanding study of contemporary American culture, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah (1985) and his colleagues make a penetrating observation about work:

> *With the coming of large-scale industrial society it became more difficult to see work as a contribution to the whole and easier to view it as a segmented, self-interested activity. But though the idea of a calling has become attenuated and the largely private "job" and "career" have taken its place, something of the notion of calling lingers on, not necessarily*

opposed to, but in addition to job and career. In a few economically marginal, but symbolically significant instances, we can still see what a calling is. (p. 66)

Bellah's example of an economically marginal but symbolically significant worker happens to be a ballet dancer, but that description perfectly fits many fine teachers, including the preschool teachers of this autobiographical project. These teachers continue to find in their work a vital link between private and public worlds, between personal fulfillment and social responsibility. They bring to their work a sense of commitment, of connectedness to other people and to shared traditions, and of collective good will. They also seem to reject the calculation and contingency that pervades so much of work today, embodying instead a sense of work closely tied to a sense of self, a view that work is not merely what one does, but who one is. And they accomplish all of this as an act of affirmation in a social and cultural surround that devalues their contribution and rewards them sparingly.

In contrast to the dominant pattern of our society which defines "personality, achievement, and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying isolation" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 6), we see in these outstanding teachers people whose work is "morally inseparable" (p. 66) from their lives, and whose social commitments are coherent with their private pursuits. These teachers seem to have found ways to talk of values in an environment that constrains that talk, and to be public and political in a world that diminishes both.

These teachers seek an authentic meeting of subjects--a meeting that acknowledges the humanity, intentions, agendas, maps, dreams, desires, hopes, fears, loves, and pains of each--and in that meeting they model what they themselves value. Because they are aware of this, they work to make explicit, at least to themselves, their own values, priorities, and stories, because they know that these things will impact teaching practice. Being aware of oneself as the instrument of one's teaching, and aware of the story that makes one's life sensible allows for greater change and growth as well as greater intentionality in teaching choices.

Robert Bellah (1985) noted that "Finding oneself means, among other things, finding the story or narrative in terms of which one's life makes sense" (p. 81). It is possible that a kind of steady, empathetic scrutiny can help in this sense-making, and can even improve teaching. There is no reason whatsoever that this kind of work needs to be the exclusive province of university-based researchers. This method could be adapted to action research projects, peer review, and teacher-run development projects. Teacher autobiographies can provide the kind of detail from which one can fruitfully interpret practice, value, and belief in light of an unfolding story. For teacher educators, researchers, and especially for teachers themselves who are seeking understanding and meaning in their work, this enterprise may provide a means of stretching their own contexts. A successful autobiographical method has positive implications for allowing greater questioning, critique, and intentionality.

Alice Walker's comment about her co-biographical projects among black women in Mississippi is applicable in a way to teachers:

Slowly I am getting these stories together. Not for the public, but for the ladies who wrote them. Will seeing each other's lives make any of the past clearer to them? I don't know. I hope so. I hope contradictions will show, but also the faith and grace of a people under continuous pressures. So much of the satisfying work of life begins as an experiment; having learned this, no experiment is ever quite a failure. (p. 17)

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